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SUBJECT: CODEL COLLINS' FRANK AND FINAL MEETINGS ON POW/MIA

REF: HANOI 589

1. (SBU) Summary: On his last day of meetings in Hanoi February 27, Congressman Mac Collins (R-GA) met senior GVN leaders and reviewed progress on POW/MIA issues during his trip. Conversations focused on the GVN's current efforts and what the USG and the GVN agree that the GVN should do in the future; the GVN's assertion that improvements in the bilateral relationship will inspire more Vietnamese citizens to come forward with information on U.S. MIAs; and a review of the status of the U.S. request to use a U.S. Navy salvage vessel to conduct MIA recovery operations in Vietnamese coastal waters. The discussions were frank. Congressman Collins said he was "disappointed and dissatisfied" with the Vietnamese response to his requests for information. End summary.

2. (SBU) Rep. Collins and delegation met with MFA, MOD, and the Vietnamese Office of Searching for Missing Personnel (VNOSMP) his first day of meetings (reftel) and then traveled to Danang for interviews with two Vietnamese veterans. On his last day back in Hanoi, he met separately with Vice Minister of Public Security Nguyen Van Huong, Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Le Van Bang, and Deputy Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung. Rep. Collins complained to DPM Dung that, in his four days in Vietnam, conversations had been "word for word repetition of the same language about cooperation." In his meeting with Vice Minister Huong, he criticized his trip as a "merry-go-round," and, following the meeting with VFM Bang, he told Assistant Foreign Minister Nguyen Duc Hung, his "host" for the visit, that he was "disappointed and dissatisfied" with the GVN's response to the list of questions and access requests he had submitted (reftel).

3. (SBU) GVN interlocutors uniformly argued that Vietnamese cooperation in the MIA effort was substantial, long-standing, ongoing, and divorced from any political linkage with other aspects of the U.S.-Vietnam relationship. DPM Dung stated that "nowhere else in the world" has the U.S. received such a high level of cooperation in accounting for MIAs, and touted the "huge strides" in resolving outstanding cases since the normalization of bilateral relations in 1995. MPS VM Huong noted that MPS officers worked closely with VNOSMP to identify Vietnamese witnesses to Vietnam War-era battles and air crashes, and to bring those witnesses to the attention of Vietnamese and U.S. experts working on the MIA issue. He added that MPS had been "very active" in bringing witnesses to meet with USG personnel both in Vietnam and Laos. Rep. Collins acknowledged MPS' efforts, but requested that MPS assist further in cases where the GVN had failed to provide access to personnel, claiming not to know their whereabouts. Rep. Collins also asked Huong to dedicate MPS investigative resources to finding information that the GVN said was "lost."

4. (SBU) Rep. Collins and Ambassador Burghardt identified areas where the GVN could make further contributions to the MIA accounting effort. Ambassador emphasized the necessity of providing detailed responses to U.S. inquiries; declaring that records were lost was not sufficient, he said. To satisfy the families of MIA personnel, the GVN should explain the loss of the records and the specific efforts the GVN had made to recover them, he clarified. Rep. Collins repeatedly emphasized that there is a link in the U.S. between the GVN's perceived cooperation on MIA issues and the U.S. Congress' continued willingness to provide trade benefits such as the BTA and U.S. support for Vietnam's entry into the WTO. In the meeting with VFM Bang, Rep. Collins noted that political focus in the U.S. had shifted from "free trade" to "fair trade" and said that the American people were greatly concerned about losing jobs to foreign competitors. If Vietnam were seen as unhelpful in resolving the MIA issue, Collins said, it would be difficult for the U.S. to be helpful to Vietnam on trade issues.

5. (SBU) DPM Dung and VFM Bang separately said they understood Rep. Collins' concerns, and noted that one reason there had been increasing access to Vietnamese witnesses was that, with the improvement in bilateral relations, ordinary

Vietnamese were more willing to act in a way that they perceived as benefiting the U.S. (Note: during the visit, Rep. Collins and his team were able to meet with two individuals to whom USG experts had been seeking access for over 12 years. End note.) VFM Bang noted that, in the past, some of the witnesses U.S. experts wanted to interview "were unwilling to meet with Americans." He said the GVN was not willing to force its citizens into talking to USG investigators, but that recent improvements in the bilateral relationship had caused some witnesses to be forthcoming. DPM Dung said that continued U.S. efforts in the humanitarian demining arena, as well as cooperation in trade and investment, were excellent steps to "minimize the consequences of war" and helped strengthen cooperation in all fields, including MIA accounting, law enforcement cooperation, and the fight against terrorism.

16. (SBU) Rep. Collins also raised the issue of using a U.S. Navy salvage vessel in underwater recovery operations in Vietnamese waters. Both DPM Dung and VFM Bang separately suggested that a better solution would be to use U.S. equipment and experts on a Vietnamese ship, or for the U.S. to donate a more modern salvage vessel to the Vietnamese navy that would then be dedicated to underwater recovery efforts. Rep. Collins stated that the U.S. did not have a ship to offer, that U.S. equipment was superior, and that to preserve the integrity of the recovery sites and the safety of the recovery personnel, the GVN would "have to" accept a U.S. ship out of common sense. DPM Dung answered that there were "unique" political and legal issues at play in Vietnam, and that the issue of a salvage ship was the wrong place for the U.S. to try to dictate to Vietnam "from a position of superiority." DPM Dung added that the issue of a U.S. military ship - armed or unarmed - operating in Vietnamese waters was "sensitive, and related to the laws of Vietnam." Vietnam's position, he stated, was that it should be a Vietnamese ship operating with the latest U.S. equipment and experts to ensure effectiveness and safety. The U.S. and Vietnam shared the same goal, Dung noted. He urged the U.S. not to let the resolution of the issue "be prolonged over the minor difference of the nationality of the ship." "We welcome a U.S. warship visiting our ports," DPM Dung said, "but not operating in our territorial waters."

17. (SBU) Ambassador suggested that, as an alternative to a U.S. ship operating alone, perhaps the recovery operation could be done with both U.S. and Vietnamese ships as a kind of joint training in salvage operations. DPM Dung noted that this suggestion had come up during the visit of Defense Minister Pham Van Tra to Washington in November 2003; the GVN was considering that possibility.

18. (SBU) Comment: Rep. Collins' interlocutors were visibly unhappy with his reaction to what they clearly believed was a forthcoming response from the GVN to his visit and to the questions he raised. His suggestion that GVN "non-cooperation" would have consequences in the trade arena also did not sit well, and prompted VFM Bang and DPM Dung to point out other areas where U.S.-Vietnam cooperation was in the U.S. interest. They seemed receptive to the Ambassador's request that they provide more details in their official responses to requests for access to individuals or for information. On the salvage ship issue, DPM Dung and VFM Bang repeatedly suggested that the issue was one to be worked out between experts, and expressed their belief that a satisfactory solution would be found. End comment.

19. (U) Congressman Collins did not have the opportunity to clear this message prior to his departure.
BURGHARDT